THE SATISFYING PURSUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS
Matthew 5:1--6
March 17, 1968

Experts in the field of communications tell us that there are certain common words and phrases which mean absolutely nothing to the average American. Some words are intrinsically vague: some carry with them unfortunate images: some are naturally associated with certain styles and modes of life that are not, at the moment, fashionable. In communications - newspapers, radio and tele vision, particularly in the advertising aspect of the business, it is imperative to avoid these words and phrases at all costs.

Several years ago the Presbyterian Church committed itself to taking seriously the vast, and largely untapped, field of mass-media advertising to communicate the message of Christianity. But to the great chagrin of the Dept. of Radio and Television, preliminary studies revealed that the very people who were to be the targets of this advertising - the average, unchurched, middle-aged, American suburbanite, simply "turned-off" mentally as soon as he heard or saw religious broadcasting of any kind. The key seemed to be the words and phrases, and images which were associated with them. And so our church turned to Stan Freberg, a dedicated churchman, whose genius transformed an unknown product like Chung King Chow Mein into an extremely successful venture overnight. Freberg produced a series of spot commercials - and they were heard. People stopped what they were doing and listened. Not everyone liked what they heard. Not everyone agreed with what they heard. But the point is that they heard. And the secret was that the commercials avoided using any of the older traditional words ordinarily associated with religion.

There are a lot of these words and phrases - salvation, reconciliation, redemption, holy. High on the list are two which appear in our text for this morning - "Blessed" and "Righteousness", two words which are workhorses in the religious vocabulary. Besides that, they are part of the fourth Beatitude - and the Beatitudes, if anything, suffer from over-exposure. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied". Communications people would say that not only do we fail to understand that, essentially we don't even hear it. It means nothing. But how about this: " Deliriously happy are those men and women whose greatest desire is to see right prevail. They will be satisfied."

Now lest you charge me with Biblical irresponsibility, let me admit that this is a combination of the approximate way the fourth Beatitude reads in the New English Bible and Today's English Version. It is, I believe, what Jesus said to those people 2,000 years ago.

The word translated "blessed" actually indicates a state of joy and happiness. I don't think that's what blessed means to us at all. For the first century Jewish peasant, "hunger" and "thirst" represented very real and very immediate concerns. They knew the feeling of a swollen tongue and an empty stomach. To hunger and thirst was something urgent. It was not an idea but a feeling, a craving that had to be satisfied. In short - it was "greatest desire".

Prior to asking what the Beatitude means, we need to hear what it says. "Happy are those whose greatest desire is to see right prevail. They will be satisfied."

The concept of righteousness, or "the right" is a little more complex. In the Bible it is a troublesome idea. From the very beginning of their story the Israelites misunderstood it. God, in the theology of Judaism, was righteous, but that divine righteousness was not just an idea about which philosophers and men of religion talked. It was something which the Israelite nation had experienced. That is, God was righteous in relation to his people. His righteousness had to do with the way he dealt with them. Likewise, human righteousness, in Judaic thought, has to do with relationships. A man is righteous by "doing right" to his neighbor, his family, his people and his God. The accent is positive, not negative: righteousness issomething people do: it is a communal, social concept, not personal and individual.

This theology was the very cornerstone of Judaism. God was righteous in his dealings with his people. They, in turn, were to be righteous in their dealings with each other. There was an agreement between God and his people called a Covenant, a contract of mutual righteousness.

And yet, over and over again, the Jews turned righteousness into something else. In fact the entire Old Testament, in one sense, is the story of God's people continually forgetting that righteousness is social. The Jews of old made it personal, individualistic. They obeyed the religious law fiendishly. They kept every rule, every regulation; they fulfilled every ritual; they made every required sacrifice; they defined righteousness in purely personal terms, forgetting altogether that the word had to do with how they related to each other. Sometimes they were worse than others. In the days of Amos, the prophet, for instance, law keeping and the legalistic approach to goodness were very popular. But people were going hungry: poor men were being exploited by the rich. And so the prophet thundered, speaking for God, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them..... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

Righteousness had a whole lot more to do with the way the poor people were being treated than the fact that the law was kept and the rituals performed.

Of course, the matter didn't end there. It didn't end in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we read about the Scribes and Pharisees who fell into this same error - defining righteousness in terms of their personal legal fidelity. They were good men - we don't ever want to forget that. They were respectable, law abiding citizens. They harmed no one intentionally: they fanatically avoided evil. But they were terribly offended by Jesus Christ. Why? Because he insisted on returning to the old definition of righteousness as the right relation between a man and his neighbor. He told a story about a Samaritan who saved the life of his legal enemy, and the legalistic Jews came out looking very bad. One time he healed a man on the Sabbath, even though the law prohibited it. He was concerned about people: they were concerned about the law. And that got him into serious trouble.

The problem persisted in the early Christian Church. Everywhere Paul the Apostle went he was followed by a group of legalistic Christians who insisted that the true Christian must obey fully the Old Testament Law. That is, righteousness was the personal possession and accomplishment of the man who obeyed all the rules, regardless of his attitude and behavior in relationship with others. It is a problem that runs through all the Pauline Epistles, and in one memorable passage Paul sums it up. If these over-zealous Christians want to talk about righteousness in terms of the law, Paul can play that game, too. "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence, I have more", and then he ticks off his qualifications: "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews: as to the law a Pharisee.... as to righteousness under the law blameless". That is to say, Paul had all the qualifications to be considered a righteous man, within the going, individualistic definition of righteousness. And, ultimately, what did it all amount to? "I count them as refuse," he said, but a more accurate translation is "garbage". (Philippians 3:2-11)

So much for the Biblical concept of righteousness. Men never seemed to be able to understand that righteousness does not exist in a vacuum - but only in the realm of interpersonal relationships. And the truth is that we are still having trouble at this point. Traditionally, evangelical Protestantism has defined righteousness as a goal to be achieved by conforming to a negative moral standard: a list of "don'ts" that is an up-to-date replica of Old Testament legalism and New Testament Pharisaism. "Don't do this: don't do that: avoid all these evil things and the result will be righteousness." Now, we need to understand that this approach to life is not bad; in fact, there is a lot of good in it. The point is that it is not the same thing at all as the Biblical concept of righteousness. As a matter of fact, one of the by-products of this negative morality is a process of withdrawal from the world, and the arena of personal relationships in which righteousness becomes operative. Barriers are built automatically between men on the basis of righteousness. For instance, I was taught as a child, in theSunday School of another denomination, that the only sure

way to remain untainted by the obvious evil of sin was to stay away from naughty children. In very vivid terms I was told that the best way to cope with a friend who says nasty words, or sneaks a smoke in the alley, was to cross him off my list of friends - as if that alone - that avoidance of contact - would somehow automatically result in righteousness.

In his excellent book, Shantung Compound, Langdon Gilkey comments on the way this fatal error in evangelical Protestantism works out in the world. The book, to which I have referred before, retells the author's World War II experience in a Japanese interment camp. Among the 2,000 prisoners were communities of Roman Catholic priests, monks and nuns, and Fundamentalist Protestant Missionaries. Gilkey points out that the fathers quickly endeared themselves to everyone in the camp: "They communicated to others not how holy they were but their inexhaustable acceptance and warmth toward the more worldly and wayword..... Consequently, no one felt uncomfortable with them, or sensed that sharpest of all hostilities -- that nonacceptance which springs from moral disapproval...

"How much less creative.... and how far from the Gospels - is the frequent Protestant reaction of moral disapproval and physical withdrawal... Not unlike the Pharisees in the New Testament (the Protestant missionaries) kept to their own flock of saved souls, evidently because they feared to be contaminated in some way by this sinful world which they inwardly abhorred. (Page 172)

That is, I believe, a very profound observation of what, too frequently, has become the typical Christian approach to the world - and the accepted definition of righteousness. We need some very basic honesty at this point. We need to acknowledge that righteousness means only to what is right in relationship with other people. We need to acknowledge that we are judged not by what we refrain from doing, but on the basis of what we have done in relationships. Righteousness does not exist in a vacuum.

That, of course, has some rather radical implications which we well might heed. The excellent television documentary "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich" brought home once again that the Germans were good, respectable, law-abiding people; people who were "righteous", if all we mean by that term is personal involvement with evil. The judgment of history, however, is that they were guilty by default of participation in the horrors of Nazism.

So -- for us -- the fact that we have never personally exploited a poor man nor personally attended a Ku Klux Klan rally doesn't count for anything. That doesn't make us righteous. The question that comes thundering out of the pages of the Bible is not "What have you refrained from doing?" but "What have you done?"

In the fourth Beatitude, Jesus defined the pursuit of righteousness - doing what is right -- as an exciting and happy venture. I'd like merely to say that to you. Volumes of words have been written and spoken about the false and shallow pursuits of our culture. Money, sex, success, pleasure. We know these are shallow goals: we know, intellectually, that it is a betrayal of our manhood to fall down before the altar of a man-made God. We know this intellectually -- but we need to hear, again and again, that the only really important thing about our lives - in the long run - is what we have contributed, what good we have done among men.

Many men have written movingly about this: none more so than Graham Greene in his excellent novel The Power and the Glory. The hero of that book is a seedy, alcoholic clergyman who after months as a fugitive from the Mexican govern is caught and condemned to be shot. On the evening before his execution he sits in his cell, with a bottle of brandy, recalling the dingy failure of his life. "Tears poured down his face. He was not afraid of damnation - even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint... He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted -- to be a saint."

That's exactly what Jesus was saying in the fourth Beatitude. "Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." That's all that really matters.

And yet there is one more word - the most important one of all - "they will be satisfied." In the face of things as they are, that is a rather remarkable prediction, perhaps even naive. The right does not appear to be winning the day: if good is more powerful than evil it is not very obvious. The blunt reality of the world appears to contradict this with the reverse prediction - that the pursuit of righteousness will be frustrating - not satisfying. Particularly it is a remarkable prediction from the man whose own personal pursuit of righteousness among men ended in such a dismal failure. They crucified him: the result of his effort was execution as a public menace. At the time, the cross of Jesus Christ, seemed to make all this talk about the righteous being satisfied sheer lunacy.

And that is exactly what it would have been, except for the fact that the cross - the defeat -- is not the final word. The final word is an open tomb - the victory of life over death: the resurrection of Jesus Christ: the historical event which nailed down for good, the ultimate truth about the world and history and the whole human story - that the right will prevail.

That is what he meant when, to a crowd of people, early in his ministry, he said these words:

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

That is the best news men have ever heard. Amen.